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## Women's Groups in Central America—Abundance in Times of Scarcity

In May 1993, 12 North American women travelled to Central America for two weeks to visit women's groups and other grassroots organizations. We met about 25 different women's groups in Nicaragua and Honduras.

In an atmosphere of increasing poverty and competition for scarce resources, it amazes me that cooperative groups should exist at all. In my experience, a sense of scarcity usually produces fear and competitiveness, not openness and cooperation. For example, women who start small businesses in their homes in order to pay for food and their children's school supplies must compete with all the other women who do the same. Competitors for a small market are not likely to be good friends.

And if men control access to money, women are often forced to compete for men—for their attentions and economic support. Statistics don't often move me, but the significance of one statistic we heard was often apparent: Women contribute 90 to 95 percent of their income to their families while men contribute only a third of their income to their families. One of the things a man may do with his spare two-thirds income is to spend it on nice things for another woman. The suspicion and competition this breeds among women is likely to discourage the trust and open dialogue that is an integral part of women's groups.

But in spite of the structural forces that can make women hate each other, some women do become friends and form groups. Rather than compete, they pool their resources to improve their lives and the lives of their families. Not because for women cooperation is biologically encoded or more efficient than competition, but because the rewards of being in a group are worth the risks. In times of material scarcity, when there is nothing left to lose and no other apparent alternative, many women learn that a group is greater than the sum of its parts.

The women we met shared with us not from a sense of scarcity but a spirit of abundance, and we were abundantly blessed. Following are contributions from some of the



women who participated in the learning tour and a few of the people we met in Central America.

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by Betty D. Sommer

## Seeing the Similarities

"When North American men visit Central America, they see the differences. When women come, they see the similarities." This comment by Colleen Kliewer, MCC worker in Nicaragua, kept coming to my mind as our study group met with various women's groups in Nicaragua and Honduras. Whether we talked with women in feminist organizations, women working with health care or legal advocacy, church women or peasant organizers, we heard the same concerns expressed, the same problems identified. These included: domestic and sexual abuse, including incest; botched abortions; lack of access to family planning; the high number of female-headed households; and the low status of women, manifested in cultural mores and social and political systems.

During our conversation with a group of Honduran women in Tegucigalpa Mennonite Church, we asked them what they saw as the main problems for women in their country. Saria, whose husband is a pastor, replied that within the church the main problem is discrimination. She noted that in most churches women cannot preach or hold leadership positions. For the society as a whole, the main issues identified were violence toward women, and single mothers, i.e. the abandonment of women by men, and the subsequent economic hardships encountered. Saria noted, "We need to empower ourselves. Jesus came and gave us value. We need to value ourselves. When we do this, men will value us as well."

Rita Martinez, a leader in the Honduran Mennonite women's organization, Femenil Nacional, identified similar problems. She commented, "Women in this country are not just a little under men, but almost on the floor. Women have not been given priority in the church—we have been marginalized." The church women are holding workshops on the topic, "What is the World of Women?" Rita notes, "We must see women not just as objects. We should be free to do what the Lord wants us to do."

One of the few Mennonite women ministers in Central America, Veronica Argueda in Managua, Nicaragua, echoed the concerns of her Honduran sisters. She stated, "Women (in the church) deal with the issues of submission, exclusion, marginalization and undervaluing. Although many are struggling daily for survival, we must work at self-esteem." In her work with "Service for Peace and Justice" (SERPAJ),

Veronica's goal is to give women a voice in participatory workshops where women, often for the first time, speak openly in a group. She states, "We need to transform a man-centered society. It is difficult, but not impossible."

While the issues identified by Central American church women may seem extreme at first, the similarities for us were certainly more striking than the differences. I was reminded of the January 4, 1993 *Mennonite Weekly Review* article citing research indicating that over half of the North American Mennonite church members surveyed still oppose the ordination of women.

Many other familiar chords were struck as we talked with women about issues familiar to us from our own work and experience. When Mariana Mendendez, director of the Honduran Women's Study Center, shared her frustration with funding agencies who wanted quick results in the treatment of incest victims, the mental health counselor in our group could readily identify similar frustrations with insurance companies and other funders who expect quick fixes without understanding the complexities of the healing process.

We made many such connections as we discovered the similarities of our experience as women. The commonalities sometimes made it difficult to leave a group meeting. Individuals lingered for further conversation, an exchange of addresses or a word of encouragement. Although we all wished we could speak fluent Spanish, language was not the barrier we had expected. With the help of our able translators, communication was very frank and direct, with much sharing of knowledge and personal experience.

The vitality of the women's movement in Central America was inspirational. One theme that emerged was the necessity of self-esteem. Self-esteem was seen as a crucial component to women's development, not as a luxury to be addressed after other "more basic" needs were met. Another theme was the need for a holistic approach to women's issues. Women we met readily identified the interconnectedness of culture, economics and politics and the ways these systems influenced the lives of women. Women's issues also were not separate from issues of human rights, peace, racism and homophobia. For example, the goal of the Honduran Women's Study

**"Women's problems are the same all over the world. Do the same work in your own areas."**



Center is to "end all forms of discrimination." Visitation de Padilla, another women's center in Tegucigalpa, began as an anti-war effort in the early 1980s.

Through our conversations in Central America, we did "see the similarities" more than the differences. Our visit added a dimension to my understanding of the expression "sisterhood is global." This global perspective is well understood by our Central American sisters. At Casas Cooperativas 8 de Marzo, (March 8 Cooperative, named after International Women's Day) a grassroots women's center in a Managua barrio, we asked what we could do to help. The reply was, "Women's problems are the same all over the world. Do the same work in your own areas."

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by Anne Findlay Chamberlain

## Two Lives, One Cloth

I met you by chance in the campo (country). I was toting my camera and journal; you were toting an infant. Our group had driven for miles through the mountainous back country of Honduras on a dirt road to get to Vega de Delicias. I remember wondering how we would ever get back to the main road if the van broke down. At one point we needed to get out and walk across a bridge, fearful that the broken slats wouldn't bear our weight.

I expected a small village, with a comidad (a small restaurant) where we would be served delicious food by the women of the co-op. What your village consisted of was a few wooden houses (huts by North American standards), a small stone building, and a structure that reminded me of a picnic pavilion. All of it appeared to be in the middle of miles of mountains, sugar cane and banana trees. The heat felt unbearable. It was at least 98 degrees with high humidity.

I noticed you, standing shyly on the edge of the gathering of campesinos (country people) and North Americans, your tentative smile greeting me in a familiar language. You looked strangely familiar with your dark hair and eyes, your body soft and round from bearing children.

Your blouse caught my eye. It was cotton, a white background with teal, pink and purple splashes of color. The sleeves were rolled up above your elbows. I have the same blouse, lost among all the others in my North American closet of plenty. I had thought about bringing it along, but decided it would look wrinkled without an iron. I regret that choice now, for I would love to show it to you.

My blouse is five years old. It was a gift from my mother-in-law, given to me in a hospital, a dark night in my life. I keep it because I love the colors [I understand that they are "winter colors." Do you worry about such things?] and I remember its history. It is a part of the fabric of my life.

What is the fabric of your life? I struggle to introduce myself, to explain that I have a blouse just like yours. In my country, I'd feel embarrassed to have the same blouse. But here, I feel a kinship and want to let you know. You seem pleased. You introduce me to your five children and your spouse. They are

**"Women in your country talk about the struggles of caring for a family and a house and also working to make a living. Are you as reluctant as I am to get out of bed in the morning?"**

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dark, beautiful, curious. I notice your affection and pride, and I miss my family.

The children's clothes are proudly washed rags, patch on patch. My sons could wear a different shirt every day for a month before I'd need to wash. You must wash every day to care for your one set of clothes.

I'm curious about you, connected to you by a blouse. "May I see your house?" I ask. You seem pleased, and we walk 300 yards down the dry and dusty path. Sweat quickly forms and evaporates in the heat. It's cooler in the shade of the trees surrounding your house. You have flowering bushes in your yard. I wonder if my geraniums are being watered in my absence. Your wash is drying over a fence of barbed wire; the few tattered clothes add color to the landscape.

The walls of your house are sticks tied together with scraps of rope and twine, with small stones placed between the sticks. "Well ventilated, but not big on privacy," I think to myself. Chicks run freely through gaps in the walls. Your house could fit in my garage.

I'm struck by the absence of things. There are no pictures on the see-through walls. I remember the struggle I had deciding which pictures to hang where during my last move. There is no furniture except a battered wooden rocker. Maybe behind the curtains that separate the sleeping area there's a bed. More likely you sleep on mats on the dirt floor. I think about my water bed. I realize how thirsty I am. No running water here. If there were I would be afraid to drink it.

Opposite the curtain is the kitchen. I notice the earthen fireplace for cooking. The smell of the wood smoke hangs in the air. Two large bowls and a cooking pot are visible. No cupboards, no refrigerator, for that matter, no electricity. I speculate that all the cooking utensils and plates of the thirteen families living in here have been pooled to provide our noon meal of tortillas, rice and beans, a small piece of chicken, and a bit of shredded cabbage.

I try to imagine how your day starts in this home. I picture you rising before 5 a.m. to grind corn for the day's tortillas, fetching water from a stream. Women in your country talk about the struggles of caring for a family and a house and also working to make a living. Are you as reluctant as I am to get out of bed in the morning?

You said that you worry about your children walking to school. Kidnappings are common here. Children are taken

and used as laborers, or worse. I worried about molesters, gang fights and drug pushers when my children walked to elementary school in my city. Now I worry about automobile accidents. Here no one has a car. I think of the two cars we own and my frustration when one breaks down.

One of the boys in the campo has a small soccer ball and he and I go outside and kick it back and forth. I am self-conscious. I wonder if I'm being culturally sensitive to the role of women.

The activity in the heat and dust makes me aware of my asthma. It's 10 kilometers to the nearest health clinic but there are no physicians or medicines there. In my suitcase I carry more medications than you'll take in a lifetime. It dawns on me that if I had been born here I might be dead. I imagine your fear when one of your children gets sick and think about you walking along the road for hours, sick child in your arms, to get to the clinic. When one of my children is ill, I get frustrated with a busy signal when I call the doctor's office.

You have been open and welcoming to me, and I want to let you into my life. I decide to show you photos of my home and city, of my family, of snow. I am aware of the contrast with your reality. I feel ashamed of my wealth in comparison to your poverty. The photo of a boarded up slum home in my city has caught your eye. You point to an object reflected on the side mirror of my car. I look closely and see my arm, draped in your blouse.

We are of the same cloth.

**Anne Findlay Chamberlain lives in Hershey, Pa., with her husband and two sons. She works as a mental health counselor with a focus on women and abuse issues. Anne serves on the MCC U.S. Women's Concerns Committee and is a member of Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church.**

**"In Nicaragua, as in North America, it is the poorest people who go to prison."**

**"In a country where female-headed families are in the majority, women who are incarcerated usually leave children behind with no one to care for them."**



by Leola Epp

## Nicaragua: Prisons and Women

Latin American writer Griselda Gambaro writes about power and control: "There is always a delegation of cruelty. That is also one of terrible aspects of our history. And the terrible thing is that power and/or cruelty are not abstractions, they are incarnated, that is, there are human beings who are cruel, who also have excessive authority. There are human beings who exercise dictatorial power, but why do they have this power? Because there is a chain, a chain of delegation, and nobody takes responsibility for saying, 'I am not going to do things that way'" (*Knives and Angels*, p. 153).

In Nicaragua, as in North America, it is the poorest people who go to prison. It is the poor who suffer the cruelty of this chain of excessive authority and complete power over their lives. While poor people may be driven to crimes of desperation like stealing food for their children, they are in prison for that crime because they cannot afford money for bail or for a lawyer. One counsellor working with Nicaraguan women in conflict with the law stated, "Here you are guilty until proven innocent."

Why are women in prison? Theft is the most common crime that sends female heads of families to prison. Since they have no money for bail or legal fees, they can be held indefinitely, leaving children to fend for themselves. If these women's self esteem was already low, it will totally disappear in prison.

Women are also serving terms for being an "accomplice to rape." One woman whose husband raped a neighbor's young daughter was charged by the neighbor as an accomplice, because she witnessed the rape, but did not report it. She is serving an eight-year prison term. Her husband, who hired a lawyer for himself, is free and holds a prominent position in the community even though it is known he committed the rape. The wife in prison fears for the safety of her own daughters. Rape and sexual assault of family members are considered private matters. A woman is considered a man's property.

Abortion is illegal even though the leading cause of maternal death is from botched abortions. A doctor in a center for at-risk pregnancies said, "In Nicaragua we don't speak of a woman's right to control her own body, because here a woman's body is not her own. It belongs to the man." Hospitals need not report attempted abortions but neighbors frequently do. A woman receives a four-year prison term if she survives, as does the attending midwife if she is found.

We heard of one single mother of two who, when five months pregnant, went into labor at 3 a.m. and aborted the fetus (spontaneous, not induced). She had no way of getting help and couldn't leave her children so she wrapped the tiny body and buried it in her back yard. A neighbor saw this and reported it to the police, who charged her with murder. She was sent to jail and her children taken away permanently. In this case the Center for Constitutional Rights, which works for legal reforms for women, has helped the woman with legal fees.

A 52-year-old woman suffering from tuberculosis is currently in prison. Medication is not provided, and she is a health risk to other prisoners. She could get out if she had 300 Cordobas (50 \$U.S.) to pay her fine. Another woman received a four-year prison term for biting another woman who had provoked her; her children were removed from her home and she had no idea where they were or if anyone was caring for them.

In a country where female-headed families are in the majority, women who are incarcerated usually leave children behind with no one to care for them. If children are completely abandoned, prison authorities may look for a solution. However, since the current government came into power, any coordination of child-care established during the Sandinista government has disappeared. Often a prisoner knows her children are hungry and being mistreated and abused. This causes her extreme mental anguish.

**"These women's centers refuse to be part of the 'chain of delegation' that keeps women in prison. They are taking responsibility by saying 'We will find another way for women in trouble with the law.'"**

**"I told him, 'You need to change. You need to share in the household duties.' We still have our differences. He listens through clenched teeth, but he accepts what I say."**

There are six prisons for men, and each one has a wing for women prisoners. All of Nicaragua's prisons have suffered tremendous deterioration in the past two years of "economic structural adjustment." According to an article by Raquel Fernandez in the May 1993 issue of *Envio*, the national prison system simply does not receive the resources necessary for human survival. In 1992 the national prisons system food budget was .90 cordobas (15 cents) per meal per inmate. That dropped to .73 cordobas (12 cents) for 1993, at a time when food prices have risen dramatically. It would take a huge increase to begin to meet basic human nutritional needs.

Some non-governmental organizations and women's groups have organized to contribute food. Prisoners rely on this food brought on visiting days to supplement their meager diet. Male prisoners have an advantage because they are visited by mothers, wives and children who bring food if possible. Women prisoners, on the other hand, are usually abandoned by their male partners and often receive no family visits, as children cannot visit alone.

In Matagalpa the "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs" have organized to do prison ministry. In this mountainous area there is an extreme shortage of water, and in the local prison the shortage becomes even more critical. The "Mothers" said water for washing or bathing is sometimes available only every two weeks, with conditions equally bad for men and women. These "Mothers" bake goodies and bring them along on visiting days. They hope to bring some joy and hope into the prisoners' lives. They also raise funds to provide housing for released prisoners.

Women's centers, working against great odds and with very little financial support, struggle with the legal system. They educate women about the law and work to reform laws which discriminate against women. They say their first concern is to get women out of prison. Their second concern is the welfare of prisoners' children and the trauma they experience when left alone.

These women's centers refuse to be part of the "chain of delegation" that keeps women in prison. They are taking responsibility by saying "We will find another way for women in trouble with the law."

Leola Epp is a lay minister at Peace Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, Sask. She has been a social worker in Prince Albert where her case load was mostly families of men serving time in local correction facilities. She has represented Saskatchewan on the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. As a spinner, weaver and past president of a goat breeders association, she took pleasure in seeing Central American sheep and goats.

**by Marlene Gutierrez Bravo  
as told to Gwen Groff**

## **"He Listens Through Clenched Teeth, But He Accepts..."**

I am the oldest daughter in my family. Ever since I was small I knew I didn't want to repeat what my mother went through. My father gave orders and my mother was submissive. I saw the abuse he gave her. I was 15 when my parents separated.

I was married twice before. Both times I left my husband. I believed a man should not make all the decisions at home. Working at the Women's Collective has allowed me to educate my children differently.

I have two sons and one daughter. We treat them equally. My daughter is not treated like a fragile little doll in our house. I am now married again. In my present marriage we have a few problems. Certainly deep down my husband is a little machista. But I have talked to him. I told him, "You need to change. You need to share in the household duties." We still have our differences. He listens through clenched teeth, but he accepts what I say.

I enjoy giving workshops to young women. Young women are easier to work with than many people we see. They are still open to learning. It is more difficult to work with abused women. Sometimes they come to our center and we spend hours talking with them. A woman may tell us her man gets drunk and abuses her. But soon we find out she has gone back with him. It is like filling the sink with the plug open.

We started out doing workshops in only high schools and only with girls. Then we integrated boys into the workshops about abuse, sexuality and family planning. At first the boys said nothing, and sometimes they asked questions totally off



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the subject. But now they seem more interested. I have hope that the next generation will be different.

We try to educate women to understand that even if they don't work outside the home what they do inside the home is work, and the house must be in their name. Otherwise a man may sell a family's house and leave the country, leaving his wife nothing, even if he has not worked to pay for the home.

I believe that regardless of where women are born, regardless of our race, regardless of our social condition, a lot of our problems are the same. I would ask of women in North America that you continue to struggle to better the condition of women's lives in your own areas.

Marlene Gutierrez Bravo works on a training team with Casas Cooperativas 8 de Marzo (named after March 8, International Women's Day). The center serves 250,000 people in 45 neighborhoods of northern Managua, Nicaragua. They hold community workshops on domestic violence, health and self esteem. They have formed a group of women constructionists and domestic electricians. Colleen Kliever, MCC worker in Managua and our guide for the Nicaraguan week of the tour, translated Marlene's story.



by Charlotte Siemens

## The Bible—An Introductory Text on Feminism?

"Sister Lydia is my role model!" It seemed a strange statement in its context. We were visiting with the Honduran Mennonite Church women's groups in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Sister Lydia was an unassuming 72-year-old woman seated among a circle of women in the sanctuary.

We spent a morning sharing of our lives and asking questions of these 10 Honduran women sitting among us. Hearing their stories, struggles and joys was a wonderful experience. They were obviously a cohesive, fun-loving group. Laughter, supportive comments and hugs flowed freely. I was struck by the group's diversity. They were women of all ages and walks of life. Some of them were involved with the local feminist group, others involved in sewing projects. All were working for change in their church. Our conversation flowed from feminism to crocheting and all points in between.

When it was Lydia's turn to speak, she smiled and asked for a donation to buy a sewing machine. Their women's group wanted to help some of the single mothers in their area repair children's clothes and make curtains. The comment felt a little out of place, but this was Lydia's concern. The other women in the group piped up, not about the sewing machine donation but in support of Lydia herself. This 72-year-old woman was a role model for the rest of the group. I found it surprising.

A woman from our learning tour asked, "What has united you and given you your perspectives as feminists?" They excitedly told us about a weekly Bible study they conduct among themselves focusing on women in the Bible. Saria, the pastor's wife and leader of the women's group, talked about the meetings and their impact on the women. She said, "What we need to do is to get everybody to read the Bible and then we'll all be feminists." The Honduran women smiled, recognizing the logic of that statement.

We North Americans smiled too, but in disbelief. I certainly never heard the Bible referred to as an introductory text on feminism. For many of us the Bible has been used to thwart women. Texts about our "rightful" place have often been quoted to us. The church has been the place that hindered our



**"Sometimes I forge ahead, but then I back up to bring my sisters along."**

growth. But these Honduran women experienced the church as a liberating force.

I left that meeting somewhat perplexed. How had they managed to bring each of the women in their group into a unified whole—worshiping, laughing and praying together? The feminist movement in North America (Christian or otherwise) has not been able to be that inclusive. How can we unite the Lydias and Sarias in our midst? These women had different needs and different understandings yet they supported and respected each other.

Since returning to Canada from an MCC assignment in Nicaragua five months earlier I had been trying to bring together those two worlds—what had my sisters in Nicaragua taught me about how to be a Christian feminist in North America?

When our study tour group had met with a Mennonite pastor in Nicaragua, Veronica Argueda, she and I lamented together how slow the church moves on women's issues. We talked about how, at times, we get tired of discussing the same issues, even with other women. Veronica laughed and said, "Sometimes I forge ahead, but then I back up to bring my sisters along."

My mind is filled with labels: feminist vs. traditionalist, conservative vs. liberal, young vs. old... I'm not very good at "bringing my sisters along." It is easier to be with people who think as I do. But Lydia, Saria, Veronica and I—four women from three countries—all care deeply for the church and for women's issues. This woman from Canada walked away from the learning tour a little more committed to looking beyond labels.

Women church leaders in Nicaragua and Honduras inspire me, give me hope and force me to keep asking what it means to be a Christian feminist here in North America. I am still stumped on how reading the Bible will turn everyone into feminists. But I carry all my North American baggage. I think I'll start reading the Bible in Spanish and buy copies for my friends.

**Charlotte Siemens led the study tour group throughout the two weeks. The week in Nicaragua meant a return to the country Char called home for almost three years. During an MCC term in Teustepe, a rural area of Nicaragua, Char worked with rural women's development projects. She is now studying and speaking and taking care of a her young son. She attends Fort Garry Fellowship Church in Winnipeg.**



by E. Louise Heintz

## Risking Investment

Starting a small business in any economic climate is not easy. It takes a large investment of time and money, a product or service and a market. For an unemployed person without enough money to survive, a small business can be a way to create one's own employment. This is more difficult for a woman because the business world is traditionally male dominated.

Because of my own experience in starting a business, I was very impressed by the work of CHISPA (Center for Credit and Training; their acronym means "spark" in Spanish), an



**"Running a business has empowered the women while providing an income for their family."**

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organization set up with the help of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) in Masaya, Nicaragua. The program, started in 1991, is in an area of Nicaragua where 40 percent of all the small businesses in the country are established. CHISPA takes a holistic approach, teaching people the basics of running a business and money management. They have loaned \$1.5 million U.S. to date. Most of these loans, which average \$50 to \$80, are given to small groups of five to seven women who co-sign the loan. Each woman has her own business and keeps the other women accountable for repaying their portion of the loan.

When we visited individual women who had received loans, I was impressed by their experience in producing their product. Dona Josefa Mora Lopez, a tortilla maker, had 52 years of experience producing tortillas. She used her family structure to organize daughters and daughters-in-law to produce over 1,000 tortillas a day. The children sold them in a nearby town.

When we visited Rosia's dress shop, we saw the culmination of a life-long dream. Rosia told us, "I am in glory now, but I had to work really hard." She has sewn children's clothes commercially for 15 years. During the day Rosia taught school. In the evenings she sewed to earn enough money to pay for her children's higher education. Through a CHISPA loan she has rented a shop and employed five women who sewed dresses she designed. Last year she employed only one person because of the poor economy.

At a hammock shop we visited, Clara Sawaso told us she learned her production skills from her parents who began making hammocks from the fibers inside cactus plants. Clara's hammocks are now made of hand-dyed, intricately woven, brightly colored cotton. Quality is important in this family business where everyone helps in production to provide a family income. Unbeknown to her, someone entered one of her hammocks in an international contest in Spain where it won first prize.

Each woman we met who had a CHISPA loan drew on skills acquired through years of experience. The traditional family structures became the framework for producing a product. Running a business has empowered the women while providing an income for their family.

**E. Louise Heintz spent the last three years establishing a sewing cooperative business. At the Eastern Canada Kanadier Clothing Cooperative in Aylmer, Ont., Louise works with recently emigrated women who have low incomes and poor English skills but excellent sewing skills. Louise lives with her husband and two sons and is a Sunday school superintendent at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener.**

  
by Gregoria L. Blandon

## **"This is the Revolution"**

Where are the smiles?  
Where has the laughter gone?  
Where have our sons gone  
that our wombs gave?

They dreamed a profound dream  
that led them to the truth.  
They dreamed in emptiness.  
The dream became reality...

I'm leaving you, O my mother,  
a token of truth.  
If one day I left  
with the intention to return,  
If I did not return, Madre mia,\*  
it was not because I didn't desire it.

Madre mia do not say,  
that I left without returning  
for I filled that empty space  
with the blood of your love  
and the sadness of hunger  
that still today one can see.

If I left one day  
leaving you with a saddened heart,  
Madre mia, do not cry  
that this is the revolution.

\* "Madre mia," literally "mother of mine" is a tender tribute to a beloved mother.

Gregoria L. Blandon, a member of the "Mothers of the Heroes and Martyrs," wrote this poem about the death of her son. In it she creates a dialogue through which she gives a voice to her son so that they can say goodbye. In Nicaragua the identity of women is so often wrapped up in someone else's life—women wrapped in their men's lives and mothers in their children's. In a culture that deifies motherhood and celebrates martyrdom, it could be easy for these women's identities to become fixed on the tragic deaths of their children. But as one of the women put it, "We don't just cry together and remember our pain. We also sew and dance and recite poetry and do things to take our mind off our pain." Maria Magdalena Vallejo DeLeon, from Mathis, Tex., translated this poem into English. Maggie served as the informal translator and cultural interpreter during this trip. Maggie is Sunday School superintendent at Tabernaculo De Fe Iglesia Menonita.

**"Because this is a women's hospital, it is a place of pain and blood."**

by Elsie Goerzen

## Reflections on Visiting the Public Women's Hospital

"Because this is a women's hospital, it is a place of pain and blood." With these matter-of-fact words the administrator greeted our group as we entered Bertha Calderon Public Women's Hospital in Managua, Nicaragua. Even the name of the hospital tells a tragic story: Bertha Calderon was a hospital worker killed in the revolution by the National Guard for attending to an injured Sandinista soldier.

As we entered this place of "pain and blood" the smells and sights we encountered were difficult to comprehend. My background in nursing had not prepared me to see women lying on plastic mattresses without adequate bedding because they had none to bring from home. I was taught a hospital was a place of healing and relief of suffering, a place where sanitation was of primary importance, and comfort and compassion were the norm. I was not ready to hear that most D&Cs are done without anaesthesia if women do not have money to pay for it, or that treatment is often incomplete because patients cannot pay. Hospital supply shelves were empty of equipment and medication, and the emptiness and sadness in the eyes of patients was haunting.

Every day at Bertha Calderon Hospital, 20-25 women are admitted due to complications of back street or self-inflicted abortions. If reported, these women could be jailed for up to four years. Yet, we were told, abortion is the only option these women can think of to survive and continue to care for the children they already have. Women in Nicaragua have so little choice in their lives, and so much responsibility that life becomes overwhelming. Depression is a common problem.

We met several mothers who were preparing to go home with their newborn infants. I wondered: What is the future for these beautiful, perfect babies? Will they be among the children unable to go to school because they do not have the monthly fee? Will they be out on the street, begging, or trying to sell tortillas in a few years? Will they fall prey to the major child-killer, diarrhea? Is there any hope for them, or for their families?

One of the primary reasons for the high maternal mortality rate in Nicaragua is the lack of good medical attention. The current government cut health care funding to one third of what it was four years ago. Prenatal care and education simply aren't available for many women. Anemia and malnutrition are accepted facts of life. Illiteracy also contributes to maternal risk because many women can't read instructions they are given when they do get care.

Healthcare workers in this hospital are paid much less than the amount required to buy the "basic basket"—a measure of the cost of goods and services considered necessary for survival. So their own health needs also suffer. Sixty percent of the women on staff are single mothers supporting a family. Many women work "triple shifts"—a double shift at the hospital, then all the domestic work at home. Some even run a small business to try to supplement their income in order to survive.



**"Where is the hope for these women and their children? What is our responsibility in all this?"**

When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he reminded us we are to have compassion for our hurting neighbors. So how do we respond to the "pain and blood" we saw at the women's hospital? As we toured the hospital and observed the suffering, it was painful to be unable to do anything to relieve the situation. It seemed such an intrusive, offensive act to simply walk through and look these suffering women in the face, without offering any help. Did they feel we were just "passing them by" as the Priest and Levite did in Jesus' story?

Our visit to Bertha Calderon Public Women's Hospital leaves me with many unanswered questions. Where is the hope for these women and their children? What is our responsibility in all this?

Yet there is hope evident in the lives of women like Jecon, the psychiatrist who showed us around the hospital. Jecon earns \$200 a month, just barely enough to survive. But she chooses to stay and work in a difficult, depressing situation. She helps women work through their grief, pain and guilt. She makes their world just a little more hopeful, because someone has listened and understood.

Psalm 103 describes God as being compassionate, gracious and abounding in love toward us, God's children. Matthew Fox, in *A Spirituality Called Compassion* writes, "to say that God is compassionate is to say that God suffers at the sufferings of others. God suffers. God is in pain. Human compassion then becomes the relief of the pain of God as well as the relief of human pain." II Corinthians 1:5 tells us, "For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives, so also through Christ, our comfort and compassion flows over into the lives of our neighbors."

So what do I do with my unanswered questions? Can I live with them? Can I admit I don't know the answers, but ask God to keep the questions alive in me, and perhaps someday show me, bit by bit, what my response to this experience means? Can I accept that these suffering women at the Bertha Calderon Hospital have something to teach me? Can I live with the thought that I may have to move beyond the safe boundaries I have set for myself into participation in the sufferings of God?

**Elsie H. Goerzen is a member of Sardis (B.C.) Community Church. She and her husband have two sons. Elsie is branch coordinator of Sardis Open Door, a service to support single mothers with pre-school children. She serves on the B.C. Women's Concerns Committee. She has worked as a nurse and now teaches piano.**

by Martha Klassen

## **Voices from Managua: "Do Justice"**

On May 16, I attended the Morazan Mennonite church in Managua, Nicaragua. There was a sense of joy in the congregation's praise to God. I had an opportunity to dialogue with young adults in a Sunday School class. I said, "There is a question in the Bible in Micah 6:8 that my church in Canada would like to ask you as Christians in Nicaragua. The question is: 'What does the Lord require of us?' What do you think God requires of North Americans?"

The answers came without hesitation:

- Do justice as it says in Psalm 103:6, "The Lord works vindication and *justice for all* who are oppressed."
- Give worth to every person, especially the poor.
- Don't promote a religion that puts money first or substitutes money for the love of God.
- Christians should not go along with all government policies. It's very important for Christians to speak the Christian point of view.
- The church should have a prophetic voice.
- The church needs to make real the message of Jesus through our actions.
- When we all, Americans from the North and the South, understand Christianity we together will make this a better world.
- Dialogue like this is very important. Justice needs to be done with equality between all people, between men and women.
- We need a policy of restitution to the poor. No one owns the earth. The earth is made for all of us. We have experienced an intervention by the United States. There have been 10,000 deaths and exploitation of our resources. Billions of dollars were spent on the Contras by the U.S. government and now we are burdened with a \$50 million debt.
- North Americans need to get rid of their arrogance and change their attitude of dominance.
- You need to liberate your North American theology.
- We need to establish a relationship of exchange, a theological dialogue.
- The best thing to happen is to talk to ordinary people like you, not to specialists with power.

The bell rang and they asked me to pray. I first said I had

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**"One thing I have learned—struggle and strengths come from the bottom..."**

learned a lot from their answers to this question. Their answers matched the answer that the Bible gives in Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

**Mary Martha Klassen lives in Winnipeg, Man., with her husband. Martha serves on the MCC Manitoba Board and is president of MCC Manitoba's Women's Auxiliary. She is a member of River East Mennonite Brethren Church. She works as a florist and teaches piano.**

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

## Strength Comes From the Bottom Up

"Before, people thought we were crazy. But with all the activities in the past three years, people have begun to listen." Dietra, one of the coordinators for Nicaragua's Service for Peace and Justice (SERPAJ-Nicaragua), explains how their work is viewed. "We educate for peace, human rights and non-violence from a woman's perspective." The "activities" she refers to include increased fighting in the mountains—even though the contra war is officially over, and the devastation of the country's economy. Up to 60 percent of the people in Nicaragua are unemployed.

Mennonite pastor Veronica Argueda goes on to explain that SERPAJ's objective is to work towards the *holistic* education of women. "We meet with all different kinds of groups, some are organized, others not." Some are rural women with quite different needs from those in the city. Women prisoners have yet other needs. But underneath it all, what they have in common are political, religious and social structures that are patriarchal. "We want to break down and transform those structures—it's difficult, but not impossible."

Founded in 1978, SERPAJ first began work in Argentina, Chile and Bolivia. A group of Catholics and Protestants began the work with a vision of non-violence for those regions. Now the organization continues to grow in Latin America with a presence in 11 countries. The Nicaraguan office was organized in 1987. Their main activities are educating on peace issues through workshops and publications.

Dietra and Veronica feel that their work contributes to women's consciousness raising by helping them to analyze their situation. The majority of women they reach are uneducated and unable to read and write, so they use a method of teaching that is participatory and collaborative. Open communication allows women to speak, something many of them are not accustomed to.

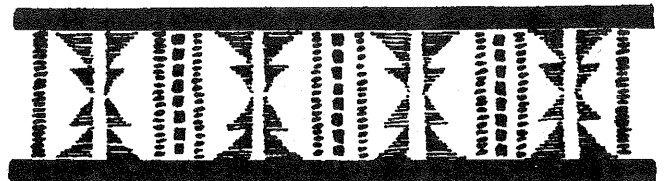
Problems women face in these groups parallel those of women all over the world. Because of their country's economic problems, they face a daily struggle to survive, often as the heads of their households. They are poorly educated, underemployed and often have very low self esteem. For these women, peace issues are the availability of clean water, food and health care.

Veronica goes on to discuss her experience as a woman pastor in the Mennonite church. "I understood the Mennonite Church believes in peace and justice. Those of us touched by experiences here want the church to work with us on these issues. Sometimes the spiritual aspects of peace have been too emphasized, and justice issues not enough."

During the war, many men left to fight—Nicaragua has forced conscription. Many male church leaders left the country. This opened a space for women in the church—not space to become more like men, Veronica explains, but space to promote more equal participation of women. As a woman, she feels she must work two or three times as hard to convince men she is "up to the job."

"Our denomination is one in which women speak out. Still, we have to fight to keep that space, and gain the trust of some women. I have to be very careful in the way I make decisions. One thing I have learned—struggle and strengths come from the bottom, and women are on the bottom. We (women) need to be on the top, yet we need our voices at the bottom, too."

**Regina Shands Stoltzfus lives in Cleveland, Ohio, with her husband and three children. She is a member of Lee Heights Mennonite Church. She works as staff associate for Urban Peacemaking with Mennonite Conciliation Service.**



**MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns is seeking Mennonite Brethren applicants to the Committee on Women's Concerns. Any Mennonite Brethren woman may apply. For information contact: Tina Mast Burnett, MCC Women's Concerns, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501; 717-859-3889.**

by Pamela Klassen

## Reading Suggestions for "Women Doing Theology"

*We have asked presenters for the upcoming 1994 conference, "Mennonite Voices in Dialogue: Women Doing Theology," to write notes to our readers, suggesting reading you might do in preparation for the conference. Following are suggestions from Pamela Klassen of Drew University in Madison, N.J., who will address the topic of "New Visions for Anabaptist Feminism." See News and Verbs for more information on the conference.*

In thinking about what sorts of books might be helpful to read in preparation for the upcoming conference, I have chosen a mix of scholarly work and poetry. Within the scope of "New Visions for Anabaptist Feminism," my focus will be partly on the process of looking back in history in order to build our present visions of women's lives. I will consider the relationship between the "cultural" and "ethnic" dimensions and the "religious" dimensions of Mennonite women's lives.

As most of the following books show, the line between culture and religion is not at all clear. The intersection between religion and culture is particularly fascinating for Anabaptists with a history of practicing "separation from the world." Decisions about just what constitutes the line between the church and the world have had profound impact on women's self-understanding and self-preservation, from how they dress and wear their hair, to how they think about sexuality and career choices.

Let me say a few words about each of the books or articles I have chosen (listed at end). *Ungodly Women* by Betty DeBerg is a helpful historical look at gender and fundamentalism between 1880-1930. Many of the male fundamentalist thinkers of this time had great influence over some Mennonite clergy in both Canada and the United States. DeBerg's book sets the stage for an understanding of the role of fundamentalism in developing 20th century notions of gender in North America. Marlene Epp's essay in the *Conrad Grebel Review* provides a careful case study of the effects that such notions of gender had on women.

In powerful poetic voices that speak in a different language than scholarly writing, Di Brandt and Julia Kasdork also

explore the relationship between separation from the world and women's lives. Their reflections on sexuality, food, clothing and "the Mennonite woman in the city" are especially evocative.

Finally, I have chosen a book that in some ways has nothing at all to do with Anabaptists. Karen McCarthy Brown's book, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, is for me a rich example of what rewriting religion from a women's perspective is all about. Through reading *Mama Lola* while mulling over my questions about Mennonite women's lives, I have found points of contrast and similarity that have provoked my own new visions of Mennonite women. The book is a mixture of spiritual biography and ethnography, and a fascinating read.

I hope you find some or all of these books or articles thought-provoking, and I look forward to sharing some of my own thoughts with you next June.

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## Women in Ministry

- **Janet Peifer** has been ordained at Refton (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church. She serves as pastor of care and counseling at the church and as associate pastor at Landis Homes and Retirement Community in Lititz, Pa.

- **Norma Peters Duerksen** of Goessel, Kan., is new associate pastor at Oak Grove Mennonite Church in Smithville, Ohio.

- **Dorothy Kratz** has been licensed for ministry in Central District Conference. She is minister at North Suburban Mennonite Church in Mundelein, Ill.

## Letters

- I have been a subscriber to *Women's Concerns Report* at least since 1980. Each issue gives me a view of the world from a perspective I may not have ever seen before, helping me to know and understand a little better how Christian women from other places or backgrounds experience their lives and understand scripture. Because women from a wide range of cultures, backgrounds, experiences and interests write in each issue, *Report* has given women a forum in which to tell their own stories and to write of their own concerns **in their own voices**. Giving voice to the voiceless is the essence, I believe, of feminist theology and has been the unique gift that *Report* has given Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women—and men.

However, when I reviewed the complete listing of past issues in the July-August issue, I was struck by the fact that *Report* has never devoted an issue to the stories of Mennonite lesbians. It is without doubt a topic on which much has been written elsewhere, and it is a topic on which many of us disagree. It is certainly not a safe topic. But it is one that cries out for a listening ear, and what better place than *Report* to hear the stories of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ lesbians, their mothers and sisters, their lovers, their friends and their pastors? We have powerful stories to tell, we who are lesbians and we who love them and pastor them. It is time *Women's Concerns Report* allowed us to tell our stories and that *Report* readers opened their hearts to hear them. It's not about theological agreement. It's about giving us a voice.

—Sharon K. Heath, San Francisco, Calif.

- My copy of the *Report* arrived today. How appropriate to celebrate CWC's turning 20 years old. I find each issue to be good reading material. My copy is often read by several other women. Still, in the large Mennonite congregation where my husband and I attend, women's leadership gifts are not being recognized. Women whose jobs during the week use their leadership, administrative and even pastoral gifts, are denied visible leadership positions in the congregation. Women's spirits are crushed when they are told an adult woman should not continue to teach a Sunday school class of adult men and women; when they must communicate with the group of

elders by giving their and others' suggestions for congregational life to husbands who are elders and/or men whom elders listen to; when they submit names of women when ballots for new elders are being prepared, only to learn that the women's names are removed before any voting takes place. Those of us in our congregation who are working for change in this regard need encouragement, support and affirmation.

—Name withheld by request

- I have been an on-and-off subscriber for a number of years and greatly appreciate the issues covered by the women who contribute to this excellent publication. I do have a concern about some statements in Cathleen Hockman's article in the May-June issue ("Women in Church Colleges"). Cathy states that "no one knows exact numbers [of women who have been raped] at these or other Mennonite schools." But exact numbers are known, or were known after they were collected at Goshen College (GC) in 1991. Darla Beck, Cindy Eby and myself (senior sociology majors) replicated Mary Koss' 1987 study as well as asking additional questions specific to students at GC. Included in our study was statistical analysis of GC data, answers to open-ended questions, and comparison of GC data with the Koss results as well as results of similar studies at three large, secular universities. The exact numbers *were* found, and the results of our study are crucial to the understanding of this issue.

Yet no one can know the exact numbers, for fear of ensuring negative publicity. We could not have done the study unless we agreed to not publish the results in any Mennonite or church-related press. In an attempt to avoid bad press directed specifically at GC, we explored the possibility of conducting similar studies at Hesston and EMC, but this was advised against for fear of negative press directed at all three Mennonite colleges. I have continued to be frustrated by this decision, especially when the information we gathered, both of an explanatory and comparative nature, cannot be included in an issue such as the May-June 1993 *Women's Concerns*. While I understand the GC caution and am grateful that we could even conduct the study, the results and survey instrument should be available and replicated on a regular basis. Silence will not alleviate the incidence of rape on our Mennonite campuses. Thank you for this opportunity to voice my concern and frustration.

—Lynda D. Nyce, South Bend, Ind.

- **Lisa Carr Pries** was licensed as associate pastor of the Charleswood Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man. Her ministry will focus on youth and young adults.

- **Carolyn Epp-Fransen** was licensed as associate pastor of the Charleswood Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man. Her ministry will focus on worship and administration.

- **Nancy Lapp** has been appointed pastoral counselor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Ind. She has served as counseling elder for Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., since 1988.

- My goal is to continue to try to understand my children and grandchildren. *Women's Concerns* helps me do that. Thank you.

—Neva Unrau, Lincoln NE

- I would like to express my gratitude to you for faithfully sending me issues of the *Women's Concerns Report*. I follow most issues with great interest, though the typical reflections of Mennonite women in the U.S. and Canada are not my personal experience, as I grew up in Germany. I appreciate the wide variety of topics and the attempt to be global and personal. Personally I am interested in two topics I have not found addressed. My family is part of a Christian community in downtown Los Angeles. My husband and I are full-time missionaries in a rough part of town. We are sharing a household with a local family. We live at what we call the "community house," which means there is lots of coming and going of people and children. So my first interest relates to experiences of families sharing households with others—including cross-cultural experiences (singles and families).

My second interest relates to living as a family in a violent environment. We are daily/weekly confronted with violence and abuse in our immediate neighborhood. My interests relate especially to child-raising in an environment that fosters the idea to be tough, kick back, yell back, etc., when I am a firm believer in non-violence and reconciliation.

With sincere appreciation and wishing you continuous creativity and wisdom from our Lord Jesus.

—Berjit Tunck Shorack, Los Angeles, Calif.



## News and Verbs

- Registration materials for the 1994 MCC Women's Concerns conference, "**Mennonite Voices in Dialogue: Women Doing Theology**," will be available by the end of November. Write to MCC Women's Concerns. The conference will be June 23-25, 1994, at Bluffton (Ohio) College. Six women biblical scholars and theologians are preparing papers for that event: Wilma Bailey, Pamela Klassen, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Rachel Reesor, Mary Schertz and Dorothy Jean Weaver.

- The second meeting of **Africa Mennonite women** was July 14-21 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in connection with the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) General Council meeting there. Ten delegates of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches from eight countries gathered there to talk about "Women's Role in the Church." Two years ago the group had met for the first time in Zaire. Doris Dube, MWC regional editor for Africa, said the meeting emphasized ways to empower women to move into church ministries. Delegates reported on women's activities in their countries, including evangelism, caring for the sick and bereaved, teaching, leading Bible studies and operating money generating projects to help supplement family incomes.

- Kathryn Gaeddert, former director of Sacramento (Calif.) History Museum, is new **director of the Kauffman Museum** at Bethel College, North Newton, Kan.

- Irene E. Lapp is new **Herald Press marketing manager**. She takes the place of Betty L. Kurtz, who left Herald Press to take an administrative position at Bluffton (Ohio) College.

- Lydia Harder is **teaching theology** at Canadian Mennonite Bible College. In spring she completed a doctor of theology degree from Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology in Ontario.

- Linda Bowman has been appointed executive administrator at **Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary** in Fresno, Calif.





Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

- **Mennonite women are invited to support Lena Siegers**, who has been chosen as a member of **Christian Peacemaker Corps (CPC)**, a team of trained peacemakers who will be available on a full-time basis to travel to situations of conflict within North America as well as overseas. The two denominational women's groups, WMSC (Mennonite Church) and Women in Mission (General Conference) as well as MCC Women's Concerns are raising funds to sponsor Lena's work with CPC. Lena is a member of Brussels (Ont.) Mennonite Fellowship and will live in an MVS unit in southern Ontario. MCC Women's Concerns urges *Report* readers to make financial contributions toward Lena's support. Checks should be designated for Lena's support and made out to: Christian Peacemaker Teams, P.O. Box 6508, Chicago, IL 60680-6508. For more information contact CPT or MCC Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

U.S. residents may send subscriptions to the above address. Canadian residents may send subscriptions to MCC Canada, 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. A donation of \$10 per year per subscription is suggested.

*This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.*

- Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) has launched a campaign calling for an end to violent toys. Elizabeth Slotter, student at Northland College in Ashland, Wis., and member at Meadows Mennonite Church in Chenoa, Ill., recently completed an internship with CPT. Her internship included developing a packet on materials on the effects of violent toys on children, and **alternatives to violent toys**. To receive the packet write to CPT (address above).
- Jane Ramseyer Miller recently released a **cassette tape** called "Open Windows, Open Doors." The tape, mostly original music, features dulcimer, guitar, woodwinds and vocals. Jane is a member of St. Paul (Minn.) Mennonite Fellowship. To order, contact Jane c/o CPT, The Peace Center, 2025 Nicollet Ave. #203, Minneapolis, MN 55404.
- Women with a **personal story of abortion** are invited to submit contributions to an upcoming *Women's Concerns Report*. Names will be withheld from publication as requested. Contact Eve MacMaster, compiler, 256 Grove St., Bluffton, OH 45817; 419-358-8230.
- Delegates of the **Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference** postponed for a year a decision on whether to allow women to serve on conference boards. The EMMC is a Canadian conference of about 3,500 members.
- Dorothy Brenneman is new director of **Mennonite Information Center**, Berlin, Ohio.



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